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SUBJECT: U.S.-VIETNAM MILITARY RELATIONS ON THE EVE OF  
GENERAL TRA'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON

Ref: A. Hanoi 2189

[B](#). Hanoi 1713

[C](#). Hanoi 1831

[D](#). Hanoi 1818

[E](#). Hanoi 1230

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: The upcoming visit of Defense Minister Tra to the U.S. to meet with the Secretary of Defense and other USG officials (ref A) is the latest and clearest of a series of positive signals from GVN concerning the development of a U.S.-Vietnam defense relationship, which has grown to include medical and other exchanges; conferences; joint attendance at regional seminars and exercises; cooperation in humanitarian efforts, demining/UXO removal; POW/MIA accounting; and an upcoming ship visit. Vietnamese officials confirm that this represents a new policy of openness to military relationships with other countries. So far, the enhanced pace of the military relationship has not been affected by other disagreements between the U.S. and Vietnam. End summary.

#### HIGH-LEVEL DECISION TO IMPROVE MIL-MIL RELATIONS -----

[1](#)2. (U) Distrust of the United States still runs deep in some circles in the GVN, and probably deepest in the military and security branches. However, in spite of vocal GVN disapproval of the war in Iraq, the 2003 House passage of a Vietnam Human Rights Amendment to the State Authorization Bill, the catfish dumping case, and municipal and state legislation to recognize the old South Vietnam flag, the GVN and the MOD have maintained a largely consistent course toward expanding U.S. - Vietnam defense relations. The GVN's strategic intent and objectives are varied (and likely focus heavily on counterbalancing the PRC), but it is clear that there has been a Politburo-level decision to promote these defense ties with the U.S. This commitment represents progress in our effort to open up Vietnam's once closed and protected military to regional cooperation and ultimately to involve Vietnam in supporting USG regional security and strategic goals.

[1](#)3. (SBU) According to Hoang Mai Van (protect), a researcher at MOD's newly-opened Institute for International Relations, Vietnam has a "relatively new" policy of openness in its military relationships with other countries in general, not just vis--vis the U.S. MOD is noticeably more willing now to send its people to participate in international and regional events, including those sponsored by the U.S., he added. According to Van, motivation for this change came to some degree from ASEAN; ASEAN contacts and exchanges "over the past couple of years" had convinced the Vietnamese national security community that if Vietnam failed to open up to security-related contacts with other states in the region and the world, it would be left behind.

[1](#)4. (U) Minister of Defense Tra, speaking to reporters at the opening ceremony of the National Assembly on October 21, emphasized the importance of improving relations between the U.S. and Vietnam. However, he drew a distinction between a defense "relationship" and defense "cooperation." The two sides would "not yet touch upon issues of defense cooperation" during his counterpart visit to the U.S., he said, but instead would focus on demining, Agent Orange research, and paving the way for "future visits of military delegations and naval ships."

[1](#)5. (U) Defense Minister Tra's visit will be the highest-level military visit to the U.S. since 1975, a fact that the Vietnamese press has been announcing at every opportunity. Vietnamese press reports have emphasized that Tra's visit represents a continuation of a pattern of high-level visits that began with then-Defense Secretary William Cohen in March 2000, and continued with President Clinton's visit in November 2000. The Vietnamese have reciprocated with a visit by Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in December 2001, and are now extending the run with recent visits by

the Ministers of Trade, Planning and Investment, and Foreign Affairs as well as Tra's visit and a probable visit by Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan in December. On the U.S. side, we are planning - and the Vietnamese have accepted in principle - a visit by Admiral Fargo in early 2004. Assistant Secretary of Defense Peter Rodman will also likely be visiting Vietnam in the near future.

#### OTHER AREAS OF COOPERATION -----

16. (U) High-level visits are not the only dimension of the improving U.S.-Vietnam relationship. Conferences, humanitarian relief, demining, POW/MIA searches, and medical and other exchanges are also long-standing elements of our bilateral defense-related cooperation. Specific examples of this cooperation are highlighted below.

##### Asia Army Chiefs Conference

17. (U) Lieutenant General Pham Hong Loi, Vice Chief of General Staff of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), attended the U.S. Army/Pacific's co-sponsored Army Chiefs Conference in South Korea from August 31 to September 4. This was the first time the Vietnamese had attended the Asia-Pacific region's senior Army leaders' meeting and the first time Vietnam had sent a General Officer to a U.S. co-hosted, co-sponsored meeting. This high-level attendance demonstrated Vietnam's new emphasis on regional military cooperation and integration and lack of concern about possible domestic criticism associated with attending what was clearly a U.S. military event. Vietnam also has participated in the Pacific Area Special Operations Conference (PASOC) in Hawaii, and regularly sends Sr. Colonel (O-7)-level students to the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies and other PACOM-hosted/sponsored conferences.

##### Other conferences and exchanges

18. (U) The U.S. and Vietnam participate in exchanges, conferences, and visits on a monthly basis at the Colonel (O-6) level and above. In CY 2003, U.S. and Vietnamese military and government officials planned or attended over fifty different exchanges, visits, and events related to the defense relationship. Though not all were completed - some were canceled due to the SARS crisis and some were postponed or canceled due to logistical reasons - this pattern of visits covering a diverse array of subjects and issues represents a solid basis for a military-to-military relationship. Vietnam has also participated in multilateral conferences in 2003 with U.S. assistance, such as the two Multinational Force Standing Operating Procedures Development Workshops in Hawaii; the Defense Environmental and International Cooperation Conference in Bangkok; the 13th Asia-Pacific Military Medicine Conference in Bangkok; and the Asia Pacific Peace Operations Capacity Building Program in Tokyo. The Vietnamese have attended (with U.S. Title X assistance) workshops and conferences in the region on HIV/AIDS; Army Management; Military Operations and Law; and Logistics Management.

##### Ship visit

19. (U) For the first time, the SRV has agreed to host a U.S. Navy Warship at a Vietnam port, currently scheduled for Ho Chi Minh City in mid-November. Ambassador Burghardt will go to Ho Chi Minh City for a welcoming ceremony, which will likely receive considerable press coverage. Admiral Fargo had tentatively scheduled a visit to Vietnam during the ship visit but MOD officials asked that he reschedule his visit. According to MOD's Americas Department, the GVN decided that a visit of his level on the heels of the DefMin's visit and the ship visit would have been too many high-profile U.S. events within a short two-week period, and that it would be better to postpone the Admiral's trip. His predecessor visited Hanoi in February 2002.

##### Medical exchanges

10. (U) PAVN and the U.S. military have an ongoing medical exchange program, anchored by the annual U.S.-Vietnam Military Medical Information Exchange. This year, Major General Joseph Webb, Commander of the Tripler Army Medical Center in Honolulu, led the U.S. delegation. Another source of medical exchange was with the visit of the Blast Resuscitation and Victims Assistance (BRAVA) training team, which completed its most recent trip to Vietnam in June 2003. Vietnamese defense officials expressed satisfaction with the visit, and planning is underway to repeat the exercise in another part of Vietnam in order to provide training to hospitals in areas with greater needs, such as Quang Tri province. Vietnam has officially agreed to host the 2005 Asia Pacific Medical Conference, another first in the U.S. - Vietnam defense relationship.

## Cobra Gold

11. (U) Vietnam has sent official observers to our multilateral Exercise Cobra Gold in Thailand for the past two years. This offered Vietnamese officers the opportunity to interact with regional militaries in the conduct of the largest military exercise in the region, as well as interact with U.S. officers conducting the exercise.

### POW/MIA accounting

12. (U) The ongoing joint operations of the JPAC Detachment Two in Hanoi and Vietnam's Office of Searching for Missing Persons (VNOSMP) is a continuing success story of cooperation between two former combatants. At one time, POW/MIA cooperation was the sole measure of the bilateral relationship. Now, the remarkable aspect of this cooperation is that, while still robust and successful, our joint POW/MIA efforts no longer represent the totality - or even majority - of our military-to-military cooperation, even as these efforts continue to expand with new efforts at archival research, interviews of former senior military officials, direct Vietnamese coordination with Laos and Cambodia, etc. Hanoi hosted Lt. General John LeMoynes, Deputy Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, in May on a visit to meet Vietnamese officials and express appreciation for Vietnamese cooperation and support of these activities (ref E). During his trip, LeMoynes discussed bilateral relations on a larger scale in his meetings with senior MFA and MOD officials, including Vice Minister of Defense Lt. General Nguyen Huy Hieu. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense and Director of the POW/Missing Personnel Office Jerry Jennings led a U.S. delegation to Vietnam June 11-17, and had extensive discussions with Vietnamese political and military officials as well as veterans groups (ref B).

### Demining/UXO removal

13. (U) The U.S. contributes funds and equipment to NGOs and Vietnamese agencies working to resolve the demining/UXO problem in Vietnam. Contributions range from the donation of computers to the MOD's military demining office (BOMICO) to a grant (which should total about USD 6 million) to the Vietnam Veterans of America Fund's survey of the impact of mines and UXO in Vietnam as well as support for NGO's involved in the removal, education and Mine/UXO victims' assistance. U.S. efforts have saved lives through the provision of more sophisticated equipment and direct medical assistance - including provision of medical equipment and skills training - as well as increased public awareness through public service announcements and community projects. These efforts have in turn generated goodwill with our Vietnamese military counterparts as well as the affected local Vietnamese populations. Signaling Vietnam's support, the GVN recently indicated that it is interested in signing on to the Level One demining survey, long a USG priority.

### Humanitarian Assistance Program

14. (U) The Humanitarian Assistance Program - Engineering (HAP-E) and Humanitarian Assistance Program - Excess Property (HAP-EP) have provided an aid dimension to the defense relationship. The HAP-E program responded to heavy flooding in Thua Thien Hue province in 1999-2000 by donating relief supplies. Later, in the flood-prone central region, the USG used the HAP-E program to build eight disaster relief centers/medical clinics over three years, including three three-story clinics in 2003. Military HAP-E teams stocked the buildings with generators and basic medical equipment. Through the HAP-EP program, the USG also donated medical equipment (defibrillators, operating room equipment and supplies) to a hospital in Can Tho in 2003. Local officials credit these Can Tho donations with saving 18 lives to date. Both HAP-E and HAP-EP have been well received in Vietnam by both the national government and respective provincial governments. In addition to the work along the central coast and in the Mekong Delta, we are examining a possible donation of medical equipment to Gia Lai Province in the Central Highlands.

15. (U) Comment: The remarkable series of "firsts" that we have seen or will see this year - DefMin Tra's visit, the ship visit, the agreement to host the 2005 medical conference, the participation in the Army Chiefs conference by a General officer - are the practical outcomes of the GVN's decision to open up further to relations in the region and internationally, especially with "big countries" like the U.S. This development has been remarkably resistant to the sorts of events that likely would have derailed bilateral efforts previously. However, the Vietnamese are not operating in a vacuum; improvement of military relations with the U.S. is balanced with increased exchanges and visits with the Chinese (including an oncoming visit by the Deputy Defense Minister and Chief of General Staff), the Japanese, and the Indians, among others.

16. (U) Whether focused on the United States, or applied equally to the other military powers in the region, the increased openness of the Vietnamese military to exchanges and contacts with other countries is a step forward in the effort to improve, modernize, and professionalize the Vietnamese military. We should encourage and nurture this positive development by continuing to engage the Vietnamese through inclusion of PAVN officers in PACOM theater-level seminars; conferences; visits to Vietnam by senior leaders, including senior OSD policy officials; and military-to-military engagement in non-combat related areas, including humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and military medical readiness.

BURGHARDT